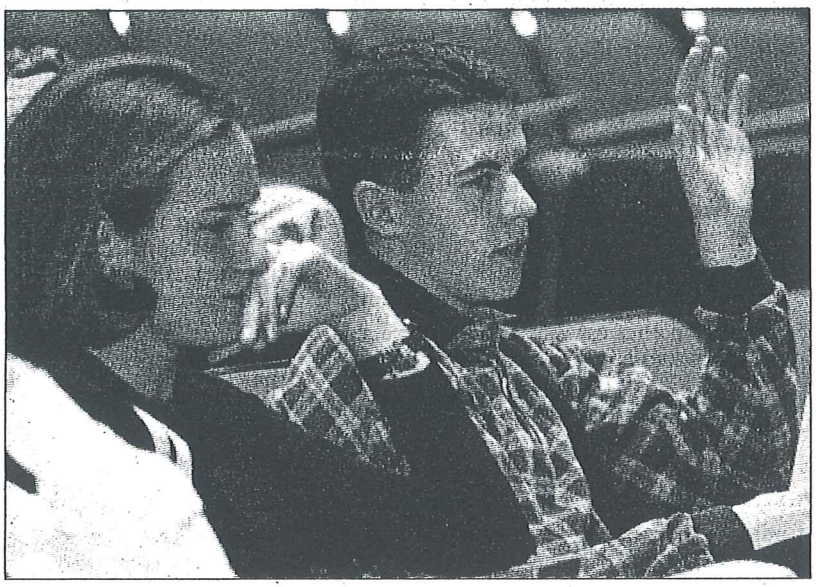
Specter is quizzed in a school visit



Upper Darby High senior Doug Clautice tries to get Specter's attention to ask a question. At left is classmate Megan Ostien.

By Raphael Lewis
INQUIRER CORRESPONDENT

When U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter went before 600 Upper Darby High School students yesterday, he came prepared, as any good politician would, to fill his allotted time.

"If there are no questions," he said, following a seven-minute statement on the importance of education, "I have a very long supplementary speech here."

Specter never got to that speech.

Rather, the senior senator from Pennsylvania spent an hour answering a barrage of respectful yet pointed questions about his views on such wide-ranging topics as U.S. involvement in Bosnia (he's against it), immigration (he favors tightening border control), trade with China (he's for it), and abortion (he says it's a matter of individual choice).

The senator, looking poised and confident in a navy-blue suit, never set foot behind the lectern provided him.

Instead, the three-term Republican walked among audience members in the cavernous auditorium of one of the five largest high schools in the state, fielding questions that were often as hard to hear as they were hard-hitting.

"Why did you change from Democrat to Republican?" a

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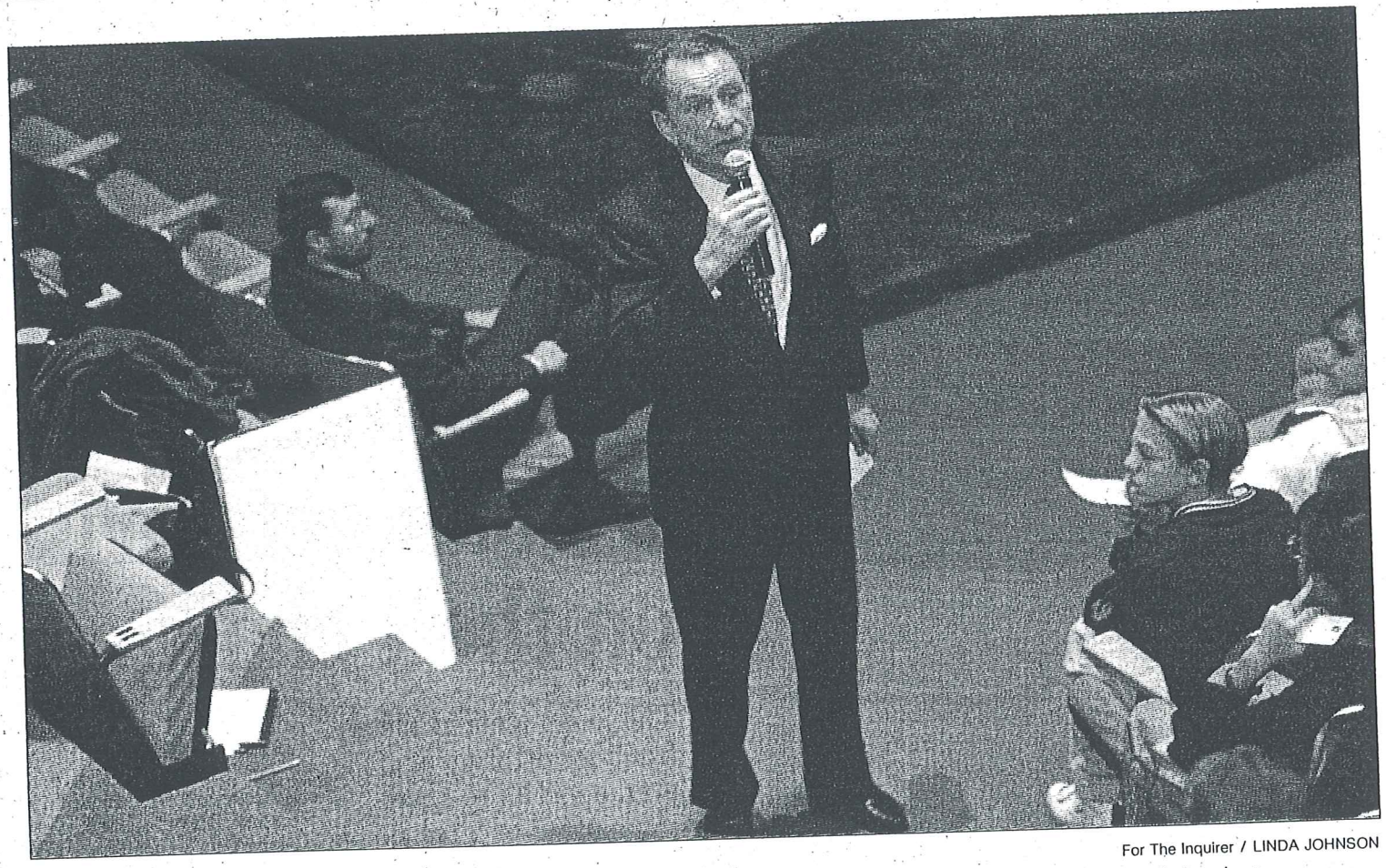

For The Inquirer / LINDA JOHNSON

U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter speaks to 600 social-studies students during an appearance at Upper Darby High School.

Students at U. Darby High peppered him with questions for an hour.

Specter quizzed by students at U. Darby High

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voice rang out moments into the question-and-answer section.

"Well, first of all, how do you know that?" joked Specter, before discussing the now-distant reasons for his switch following his election as Philadelphia's district attorney in 1965.

"I feel very comfortable as a Republican in the United States Senate," he concluded. "We need people who are in the center of the political spectrum. I think principles are more important lots of times than party."

No sooner had he finished than another hand shot up. "You mentioned today the importance of education, and I was wondering if you supported President Clinton's plans for targeted tax cuts for education?" another student asked.

Specter, speaking as though he were fielding questions from a pool of seasoned journalists rather than an auditorium filled with four grades of social-studies students, responded that "people ought to be encouraged to send their kids to college."

"And when people cannot afford to send their children to college, I think the government ought to come in with guaranteed student loans to enable people to go to college," he continued.

"You have to pay them back, which is really a burden. But no matter how burdensome it is, it sticks with you. I cannot emphasize that to you too much." He said he favored the tax-cut plan.

Paul Zangrilli, the school's social-studies coordinator, said he was pleased with his students' performance.

"To be honest, we had no more than five minutes of class time to talk to the kids and tell them that Sen. Specter was speaking," he said.

"These kids were not prepped. But the curricular issues from our classes were evident out there."

For many students, the senator had been an unknown quantity.

For others, his visit humanized what had once been a talking head on that cable news channel between MTV and ESPN.

"In the news, he seemed real strict," said Sovannak Bun, an 11th grader who was part of the one-fifth of the school that attended. "Today, like, he added some humor and other stuff. . . . But I was hoping he would speak Yiddish."

Ninth grader Kristen McCaskey said Specter's hour altered her cynicism toward American politics.

"I thought most of them [politicians] were quacks or something," she said. "But since he didn't have a prepared speech or talk to his lawyer, I think I'll change my view of politicians."

Afterward, Specter said he was flattered by the enthusiastic response.

"I enjoyed myself very much," he said. "I answered a lot of questions. I answered questions for about 30 minutes, and I still counted 12 hands up. . . . It was a lot of fun."

Though the students made Specter work for the full hour, his time could pay off as early as the 1998 senatorial elections, at least if 11th grader Lorie Maher is representative of her peers.

"The students put him on the spot, and he stood up to it, no problem," Maher said. "I would vote for him."